



THE NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

# Reviewing Stand

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### How Does Color Affect Our Lives?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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**THE REVIEWING STAND** is a weekly radio forum presented by Northwestern University. The program was first broadcast by Station WGN, Chicago, October 14, 1934. It has been on the air continuously since that time, originating in the WGN studios, and, since 1935, carried by stations of the Mutual Broadcasting System. **THE REVIEWING STAND** presents members of the Northwestern University faculty and distinguished guests from business, government, education, and the press in round table discussions of contemporary problems—the questions that are in the news. The program is under the direction of James H. McBurney, Dean of the School of Speech, Northwestern University, and Miss Myrtle Stahl, Director of Educational Programs, WGN, Chicago.

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# How Does Color Affect Our Lives?

**MR. BORIN:** The toy manufacturer asks, "What colors do children prefer in toys?" A plant superintendent inquires, "What color should I paint my plant walls to increase production?" A hospital manager asks, "Should I paint my hospital walls white, peach or green to decrease the tendency for patients to feel ill?" The home owner says, "I want a quiet, warm atmosphere in my living room. What colors should I use?"

Here to answer these and other questions related to color in our lives are Louis Cheskin, pioneer in color research, author of the book, *Colors—What They Can Do For You*, and Director of the Color Research Institute of America; Carl P. Duncan, Professor of Psychology at Northwestern University, and Colonel Alexis Sakhnoffsky, one of the world's leading designers, and Mechanical Fashions Editor of *Esquire* Magazine.

Cheskin, as an expert in color research, you should be able to answer our question for discussion, "How does color affect our lives?"

## Psychological Effect

**MR. CHESKIN:** Color affects our lives in many ways. For example, it affects us even in lighting conditions in the home and at places of work, but the most important effect that color has upon our lives is psychological.

As a matter of fact, our well-being, our happiness at home, depends to a great degree on color environment—what kind of colors we have there. Our efficiency at office or in an industrial plant is to a great degree conditioned by color.

**MR. BORIN:** Duncan, as a psychologist, how would you answer that question? How does color affect our lives?

**MR. DUNCAN:** I would pick a specific example from the field of psychiatry—the treatment of emotionally disturbed patients. Sometimes in mental hospitals color is used to quiet the disturbed patient, or to stimulate the

depressed patient. For example, the person who is extremely disturbed may be put in a room in which the glass in the window transmits only blue light, so there is a bluish tinge to the whole room. This occasionally has the effect of quieting the disturbed patient.

**MR. BORIN:** Colonel Sakhnoffsky, as a designer, how would you answer our question?

## Positive or Negative

**COLONEL SAKHNOFFSKY:** My approach to this question, as a stylist, is slightly different than the one used by scientists. My approach is entirely emotional. I believe that the colors we use in our lives can be used positively and negatively. I believe they affect our moods, our efficiency, our rest and output.

Without wishing to overdramatize it, I believe that colors can be as harmful as they can be pleasant. For instance, they can stimulate an executive, they can relax a worker, and they can even overstimulate a sensitive housewife.

**MR. BORIN:** To get back to the person who sees color, let me ask this question: Duncan, how does a person see color in the first place?

**MR. DUNCAN:** Primarily, the technical aspect concerns the eye. There are special receiving mechanisms in the eye for different colors. These receiving mechanisms are usually considered to be three in number, since a person needs to see only red, green and blue to make all other possible combinations.

**MR. BORIN:** Would you disagree with Duncan, Cheskin?

**MR. CHESKIN:** I don't disagree, but I think it's not a complete answer. When we speak of red, green and blue, we speak of colors that constitute only the components of light, and we must remember that energy and matter equal each other and are in-

terchangeable, and when we speak of light, we are speaking of visible energy.

All light does consist of an orange-red, a green and a violet blue, but then there is another set of primary colors which is the exact complementary to these, and they are green-blue, magenta red and yellow. When I say they are the exact complementaries, it means that a primary color of pigment is the exact complementary to a color of light, and a pair of complementaries equals three primary colors either of light or pigment.

I know it's difficult to explain this on the radio without showing it, but perhaps I can outline it simply by saying that in a pair of complementaries, one color is always a secondary and the other a primary. The secondary, of course, consists of two colors.

Now, take magenta red and green. In pigment magenta red is a primary color. In light it is a secondary color. It consists of two colors. Green, on the other hand, is a primary color; it is one-third of white light, whereas, in pigment, it is a secondary color; you make it out of blue and yellow.

### Complementary Colors

I will repeat, there is difficulty in explaining that, so my suggestion is that those of the audience who are really interested in seeing what these colors are like—that is, the primaries of pigment and the primaries of light—and how they interchange and how they are complementary to each other, should go to the public library and get one of my books, particularly the one, *Colors, What They Can Do For You*.

MR. BORIN: I don't know whether we should accept that "plug" or not. Perhaps we should wait for color TV.

MR. CHESKIN: I would say that would be wonderful, and I hope we don't have to wait too long.

MR. BORIN: You've been talking about the normal person who can see color. What about the person who

is color blind? Can you tell us about the nature of color blindness, Duncan?

MR. DUNCAN: Color blindness is relatively infrequent. It occurs mostly in men, and the estimate is that about 8 per cent of men are color blind.

MR. BORIN: Is that why we choose such very bad colors for our ties and socks?

MR. DUNCAN: Looking around at my colleagues this morning gives me the impression that we must all be red-green blind.

But color blindness is primarily for red and green. Color blindness for blue and yellow and other colors is quite rare.

### Color Blindness

MR. DUNCAN: The totally color blind person would see everything as blacks, whites and grays. As a matter of fact, everything would be a shade of either light or dark gray. Such people are extremely rare.

MR. BORIN: The most frequent condition is a red-green color blindness, and that occurs in various degrees. Is that right?

MR. DUNCAN: Yes, there are various degrees of color weakness for red and green.

MR. BORIN: What about a cure for color blindness? Can we offer any hope to the person who has red-green color blindness, for example?

MR. DUNCAN: Not if it is the usual type of red-green color blindness, because that is inherited. There are some cases of acquired red-green blindness, perhaps due to an illness, and that may clear up when the illness is over, but the usual inherited red-green color blindness—no.

There have been various cures offered, all the way from injections of cobra venom to eating carrots for Vitamin A, but none of these has any effect.

MR. BORIN: You're extremely pessimistic on that score, then?



MR. DUNCAN: Very pessimistic.

MR. BORIN: Cheskin, a moment ago you mentioned white. Do you consider white a color? Well, let's include black, too. Are white and black colors?

### Black and White

MR. CHESKIN: Psychologically, white and black are colors, because they have an influence on people's behavior patterns, and they get reactions out of people—favorable or unfavorable, usually unfavorable when the black and white are in great quantities, but actually, or physically, white is the totality of color. In other words, white is the combination of the primary colors. When you break up a ray of light with a piece of prismatic glass, you can see those colors. You can also see them in the rainbow, where raindrops break up a ray of light.

Now, black is the complete absence of colors. When you see black, it means that that particular material has taken all the colors from the light, and you see nothing but black. So, physically, black means all the colors are not there; white means all the colors are there; but psychologically, they have a tremendous influence on us.

MR. BORIN: A moment ago I noticed Colonel Sakhnoffsky's eyes light up when he talked about certain colors, which gives me the feeling that he prefers some colors over others. What has determined this color preference, Colonel?

COLONEL SAKHNOFFSKY: A designer has to depend largely on his emotions to select colors, and at the same time, he has to use a certain amount of psychology. It has been my experience over the last 25 years of engineering styling that the majority of top executives who approve new colors for a product will not accept colors which have been selected by a test if they don't like them themselves. For this reason I have to study the personality of the executive before I submit my color sketches, and, of course, that is

based on his education, his upbringing, his personality.

MR. BORIN: And his wife, too?

COLONEL SAKHNOFFSKY: And his wife.

### Color and Selling

MR. CHESKIN: That is a very interesting observation. I participated in a conference with an agency where a package for a synthetic soap was discussed, and of the executives, a vice president, said that his wife didn't like a particular package. Those present in the room were employed by the man, and they didn't say much about it. Well, I wasn't employed by him, so I told him that his wife's taste was not a good criterion, and was absolutely worthless in that case, because she was not a typical purchaser of that kind of a product, and that, after all, we were interested in selling this product to many, many people, and we had to find the best ways and means to do it. In other words, we had to conduct market testing to determine whether that package had appeal to the greatest number of people, and not to any executive.

Unfortunately, however, Sakhnoffsky is correct. Many executives take the position, "If I like it, it's good, and if I don't like it, it isn't good." But I must say that the most important corporations, we find, know better than that. They not only have their own research departments but they ask Color Research Institute and other research organizations to conduct market tests.

MR. BORIN: Which makes you extremely happy.

MR. CHESKIN: It makes me happy for many reasons: personally, because that is the way I earn my living; objectively, because objective measurement is really the only way to determine anything.

MR. BORIN: Is the moral of your story that vice presidents are usually right, and wives are always right, or that we should conduct more research in color preference? (laughter)

MR. CHESKIN: I would say that the

moral of the story is that we'd better do more research, and we should not think that our personal taste is the taste of other people.

### Psychological Importance

MR. DUNCAN: I want to thank my colleagues for the "plug" that psychology is getting, and then I want to get in a "plug" for Mr. Cheskin's Institute. A man in a case I happen to know should have used his resources. As you know, in recent years we are beginning to buy automobiles in a variety of colors, and even home appliances. Well, there was a baker in the western part of this country who once attempted to market bread in pastel tints of green and blue; he nearly went into bankruptcy.

MR. BORIN: What colors do children prefer?

MR. CHESKIN: Children prefer pure colors, particularly the two sets of primaries, that is, the six pure colors or six spectrum colors. Among those would be magenta red, orange-red, green-yellow, violet blue, and turquoise blue. The favorite color is red.

I might add — and perhaps it fits in with the answer to this question — that when Mama buys pink clothes for her little baby, she is buying them for Mama, because the little baby hardly sees pink, and certainly doesn't appreciate it.

MR. BORIN: What would you say about nurseries? Should we paint them bright reds and blues and yellows?

MR. CHESKIN: Not the entire wall, because psychologically it would be too much of a burden, but certainly there should be many red, yellow and orange toys and a few blue ones, because those are the colors that the child enjoys the most.

MR. BORIN: Moving from children to adults — is color preference related at all to emotional stability?

MR. CHESKIN: Very much so. We have what we call normal patterns of color reaction. Normal reaction patterns show that people like diluted colors,

for example, peach, which is a diluted form of orange, or pure magenta red, which the normal person finds is neither too warm nor too cold. But when you have a person who paints a room black, you know that is not a normal reaction, because normally people would react negatively to a room painted completely black. Or, when you have a person who is just the opposite, who has a phobia against a color, who can't be in a room because it's painted blue — that isn't normal, because normally people react favorably to blue.

MR. BORIN: Let me ask you this question: Is there a sex difference in color preference? In other words, do men usually prefer one color, and women another?

For example, I like breezy blue. Does that indicate a color preference based on a sex difference?

### Reaction Patterns

MR. CHESKIN: Yes, to a great extent. All of our tests, which are of the free association type, and unconscious preference tests that we conduct for our clients, show that there is a considerable difference between feminine and masculine choices of color.

But I would like to add that just because a person expresses a preference doesn't mean it is really his preference. You will ask a man if he likes a certain color and he'll say "No, I don't like it. It's too loud." That doesn't mean he doesn't like it. It means he doesn't think he should wear it, that it isn't fitting for his personality, that it isn't fit for his business purposes, that it doesn't make a favorable impression; but he may enjoy it very, very much.

This is evidence for that: You will find a group of very conservative business men who wear nothing but neutral colors — grays and tans and browns and muted blues — who, when they go out in the country, put on very loud shirts, and when they go hunting, get red blankets. Their excuse is that it has great visibility, but actually, where they are going,



they don't need visibility. They just love the red blanket, and they love the very flamboyant ties and flamboyant shirts, because they can let go. You see, the inhibitions have left them, and the conscious purposes aren't needed any more. They act naturally, and therefore do enjoy certain bright colors.

### Response of Women

MR. BORIN: Women are a little freer to express their preference in colors. In terms of design, Sakhnoffsky, what colors do women prefer?

COLONEL SAKHNOFFSKY: I think that women don't believe as much as men in letting go in color. In other words, they can use a certain amount of that "let go" in decorating their homes and in the use of proper accents, in the choice of bright hats occasionally, to boost their morale. We are precluded to do this by our sex, but it seems to me that women do want us men to wear brighter colors. I have heard it so many times.

MR. CHESKIN: When you say, "by our sex," I think it happens to be statistically so, but isn't it the social role, or the psychic situation that determines the difference in taste? The man thinks consciously of colors as a means toward ends, perhaps, because he is the breadwinner, perhaps because he has to use all sorts of means to gain a living, whereas the woman really has an opportunity to react more naturally. I think Sakhnoffsky is correct when he says she gets her outlet in interior decoration and getting a new hat with bright feathers, every two months, and therefore she is less inhibited.

I might say that women are not inhibited, and therefore express themselves more spontaneously in color, where a man is actually inhibited, or inhibitions are forced upon him consciously.

MR. DUNCAN: You said something, Mr. Cheskin, about men using colors as a means to an end. Don't you think, for example, that women's use of red bathing suits or green evening gowns

is possibly a means to an end, as well?

MR. CHESKIN: Duncan, I think you're right, except that the end or the objective is entirely different.

MR. DUNCAN: Quite different.

MR. CHESKIN: The man uses it to make money, and perhaps I should say the woman uses it to attract a man. Notice, I use the word, "attract."

MR. BORIN: I am reluctant to interrupt this very interesting discussion, but I'd like to ask Sakhnoffsky this question: Is color related at all to design?

### Relation to Design

COLONEL SAKHNOFFSKY: It definitely is, in this manner: Though color is not the primary objective in the design of a product, a product can be entirely ruined by an improper color scheme. In other words, when I design an industrial product, I first create the shapes, designing around the physical requirements of the mechanism itself, and after the product is satisfactory in the shape, I use color to emphasize a certain function, to bring together into one ensemble, all the different elements, and finally to make the product more universally acceptable by the use of a variety of colors.

MR. BORIN: We have implied throughout the discussion that colors affect our feelings and behavior. Do colors tend to make us feel warm or cold, Cheskin?

MR. CHESKIN: I should say so. As a matter of fact, we have case histories where people complained that it was too cold in the dining room, where actually all that had taken place was that the dining room was redecorated from a peach color to a blue color. It couldn't have possibly been too cold, because it was a new building in which the temperature was thermostatically controlled, but the people insisted that it was cold. As soon as the dining room was repainted again, back to peach, it wasn't cold anymore. That shows that you actually have physical reactions from color.

MR. BORIN: Can color also make a room seem larger or smaller?

MR. CHESKIN: Very much so.

MR. BORIN: What colors are involved here? Suppose you want to make your room seem larger, what colors would you use?

MR. CHESKIN: Light tints of cool colors, like blues and green-blues will make a room look larger, whereas deep colors make it look smaller. Also, colors that are warm, or advancing colors of the red family, will make a room look smaller.

### Affect on Appetite

MR. BORIN: Do colors affect our appetite?

MR. DUNCAN: Yes. As a matter of fact, I believe this work which has been reported by Mr. Cheskin, has been done by his organization and others. There have been some very interesting experiments in which people were invited to a banquet, and colored lights were directed on the food while the people were eating, very gradually — so they wouldn't notice it — the hue of the color of the spot-lights was changed so the food began to turn a different color. Under these circumstances some people actually became ill, others stopped eating, simply because of the change in the color of the food.

MR. CHESKIN: I'd like to add this recent experience — with which most people are familiar — which will add to what Duncan just said. It was a test we conducted on margarine and butter. We asked a large panel whether they preferred butter or margarine, and of course, over 99 per cent said "butter." We asked them to give at least two reasons. The reasons given were that margarine did not have the food qualities of butter, and second, that it did not taste like butter. Some of the words used to describe the taste were "oily, greasy, more like shortening than butter."

I'm not going to take the time to describe the technique of testing, but in the test, we actually served two

pats, one white margarine and the other colored margarine. We asked them to taste the two and tell us whether they could discern any difference. The yellow margarine tasted like butter, they said, but the white margarine tasted oily, which goes to show that people often attribute to something qualities which aren't really present. In other words, people thought they could discern a difference in taste between the two pats when actually there was only a difference in color.

MR. BORIN: Moving from the dinner table to other aspects of living, what are the factors that should govern our selection of colors for the home?

### Color in Decoration

COLONEL SAKHNOFFSKY: I'm not a decorator by profession, although I have been called on to do a certain amount of color selection for homes for both customers and friends.

You have to study the personalities and habits of people who are going to live in a home. And, of course, geographical location has a lot to do with it. I have noticed tremendous higher color preference in California and Florida, which also applied to their cars. Most of the light-colored cars are sold in those areas.

MR. CHESKIN: We have a home furnishing service at Color Research Institute. As a matter of fact, we are just about to release the service to the home furnishing industry.

We have a questionnaire that people fill out when we "color tune" their home. In this questionnaire we ask for a description of the personalities of the people. Of course, we don't ask them to describe their personalities; we have leading questions which give us a picture of the type of furnishings they have, or the type of pictures they have. The kind of lighting in the home, and the kind of materials used in the construction of the home are also important.

Now, all of those combined — that is, the physical factors, the lighting factors and the psychological factors



of the personalities who are living there — are all important.

MR. BORIN: I assume, then, that a person who is highly excitable should have colors that will counterbalance that emotional temperament.

MR. CHESKIN: In that case we use blue colors, blues and green-blues.

### Color and Clothing

MR. BORIN: What can you tell me about the choice of colors for clothes? What factors should govern our selection of colors for wearing apparel?

MR. CHESKIN: Complexion is one important factor, of course. You know, redheads, the more educated redheads, always wear greens, and they're smart. They want to play up their red, and red, being complementary to green, makes the red look even redder.

MR. BORIN: What about blondes?

MR. CHESKIN: They look best in blues. Most blondes, those who are educated in styling, will wear blues because yellow looks yellower, and even a blonde who isn't, you might say, very blonde, will look more blonde against a blue background than she will against a yellow background or any other color.

COLONEL SAKHNOFFSKY: I would like to confine my remarks to colors for men. I believe that you have to consider what these clothes are going to be used for — whether for business or for romantic pursuits or social gatherings.

I personally have no patience with bright ties in business, because I believe that your sparring partner in business will be more interested in the flowering magnolia on your tie than in what you are saying, so I believe that good cut and quality are much more important than color selection for business purposes; it's

entirely different for social gatherings.

MR. DUNCAN: I would agree that the color of a person's hair or his complexion might influence his choice of colors for his clothes.

I believe we have talked about situations in which color has been important, but there is certainly one place where color is not important, and that is the color of a person's skin.

### Psychological Needs

MR. BORIN: In a lighter vein may I ask this question: Why do farmers paint their barns red?

MR. CHESKIN: I think that is a very interesting question, because we asked that of farmers. People don't know the real reasons. They say it's cheaper. Actually, it is because red meets a psychological need of the farmer. They are constantly surrounded with green. Red being the exact complementary, fills an optical and psychological need. In other words, red and green equal white light, and red and green, therefore, present an eyeful which is very pleasing.

I'd just like to add this: The red they use is red oxide. It is a mineral color, and you can get color just as cheap in mineral colors known as yellow ochre and green oxide and burnt sienna and —

MR. DUNCAN: Now, Cheskin, you're talking about unconscious preferences. What about the farmer who grows geraniums? If you put together his red barn and his green fields, you imply he wants to look at white. I'm afraid I can't agree with you on the reason you give for farmers painting their barns red.

ANNOUNCER: I'm sorry, gentlemen, but our time is up.





## Suggested Readings

Compiled by William Huff  
and M. Helen Perkins, Reference Department,  
Deering Library, Northwestern University



BIRREN, FABER. *Color Psychology and Color Therapy*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1950.

Traces the history of the therapeutic use of color and examines the biological, psychological and visual effects. Includes a bibliography.

CHESKIN, LOUIS. *Color for Profit*. New York, Liveright [1951].

Gives the reasons for the public's choice of certain colors, the effect on buying, and the ways in which right color combinations can boost profits.

CHESKIN, LOUIS. *Colors: What They Can Do for You*. New York, Liveright [1947].

After a detailed analysis of color, the author describes what color does to you, color in art, color in interiors, color in merchandising, color and art in the future, and self-expression through color.

CHESKIN, LOUIS. *Color-Tuning Your Home*. Chicago, Color Research Institute of America, 1951.

This booklet covers the psychological and practical elements to consider in selecting colors for the home. 16 pages.

KARGERE, AUDREY. *Color and Personality*. New York, Philosophical Library, 1949.

Colors, and their influence on personality and thought.

*Advertising Agency* 44:76, Mar., '51. "New Color for Advertisers." L. LAP-SLEY.

Day-glo fluorescent colors add a new stimulus to advertising.

*American Builder* 73:166-7, Jan., '51. "House in Uniform."

"Planned harmony in exterior colors gives individuality."

*Architect and Engineer* 183:8-9, Oct., '50. "Colors Improve Health and Increase Production." W. SCHWEISHEIMER.

Emphasizes the importance of color to the building industry, especially for the erection of hospitals, schools and industrial plants.

*Art and Industry* 49:128-35, Oct. '50. "Colour Planning in Industry." W. H. CLARK.

Specific suggestions for the use of color on machinery, floors, woodwork, walls, etc. of a plant manufacturing a colorful or a non-colorful product. Includes charts and colored illustrations.



*Better Homes and Gardens* 29:66-7, Je., '51. "Paint Puts the Rainbow at Your Finger Tips." M. L. BRANDT.

Hints for creating desired effects in house interiors through various uses of color and color combinations.

*Fortune* 43:122-8, Je., '51. "Color in Industry.

Color, as used in industry, is valuable for identification, visibility, and contrast. Many illustrations, some in color.

*Good Housekeeping* 131:66-7, O., '50. "Color Has a New Job Today."

With the new pattern of living in smaller quarters, subtle shades and monochromatic color schemes are called on to create an illusion of spaciousness and order.

*House and Garden* 98:82-91, Sept., '50. "Shop with Color in Mind."

A guide to House and Garden's 23 colors for 1951 including a color chart showing four basic room schemes.

*Library Journal* 75:2104-8, Dec. '50. "Color and Environment." S. W. QUISENBERRY.

How the du Pont Company through a study of the functions of color assists business and industry in practical applications of "Color Conditioning."

*New York Times Magazine* p. 22, Mar. 11, '51. "Bright (Not to Say Blinding) New World." T. HUDDLESTON.

Because of a greater understanding of man's sensitivity to colors, the U. S. has entered an era of vastly increased color use. Color in television is expected to further this.

*Psychological Monographs* 50:1-60, 1938. "Color-Music." J. KAREVOSKI and H. S. ODBERT.

An extremely interesting article on the psychological and artistic implications of the color stimulus of music.

*Wilson Library Bulletin* 25:513-514, Mar., '51. "Color in Libraries." A. HOWELL.

Factors to be considered in the use of color in libraries in order to achieve improved conditions for study, and greater mental and spiritual satisfaction.

*Management Review* 40:144-5, Mr., '51. "Importance of Color in Marketing Abstract."

Describes the physical and psychological effect of colors used on products, in manufacturing plants, and for advertising.



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*List of all available issues on request*

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18. Accidents—Childhood's Greatest Health Hazard.
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